

Leadership and decision-making practices in public versus private universities in Pakistan

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to examine differences in leadership and decision-making practices in public and private universities in Pakistan, with a focus on transformational leadership (TL) and participative decision-making (PDM). We conducted semi-structured interviews with 46 deans and heads of department from two public and two private universities in Pakistan. Our findings indicate that leadership and decision-making practices are different in public and private universities. While differences were observed in all six types of TL-behaviour, the following three approaches emerged to be crucial in both public and private universities: (1) *articulating a vision*, (2) *fostering the acceptance of group goals*, and (3) *high-performance expectations*. In terms of PDM, deans and heads of department in public and private universities adopt a collaborative approach. However, on a practical level this approach is limited to teacher- and student-related matters. Overall, our findings suggest that the leadership and decision-making practices in Pakistani public and private universities are transformational and participative in nature.

Keywords

Transformational leadership Participative decision-making Public/private Universities Qualitative study

Introduction

Worldwide, higher education has become increasingly important. It is considered a critical factor in innovation, human capital development, and the development of a knowledge economy (Dill and Van Vught 2010). It is also undergoing profound changes and reforms (OECD 2008). The dramatic expansion of higher education has introduced particular institutional problems linked to student-learning and curricula, quality assurance, high student enrolment, lack of resources, accountability, and above all, problems with respect to leadership (Haider 2008).

Among the challenges in higher education, research presents academic leadership as one of the most critical challenges for the future (Bolden et al. 2012). According to Brown (2001), changes in quality requirements, demands from the public, funding agencies, new technological demands, etc. require “leaders who thrive on the challenge of change” (p. 312). At the same time, this introduces a critical debate about leadership styles (Sinha 2013; Jones 2013). Shared and distributed leadership approaches dominate the related literature (Bolden et al. 2012) and strongly build on Ramsden’s (1998) argument that shared leadership in academic institutes should be based on “how people relate to each other” rather than hierarchy. Brayman (2007) supports this notion by stressing that within academic institutes, leaders should foster a balance between support, autonomy, and academic staff expectations. This leads to an emphasis on staff consultation regarding important decisions.

Pakistan is facing higher-education challenges that can be linked to this particular context. Both public and private universities in Pakistan are autonomous bodies, recently confronted with changing circumstances. First of all, there has been a growing need for access to higher education, which has resulted in (1) an increase in the size of universities and (2) the emergence of private universities. At the same time, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has imposed new requirements to be met by both public and private universities. These requirements include the alignment of academic degrees with international standards, curriculum revisions, and the development of quality assurance units in universities (HEC 2009). As for academic staff, a programme has been launched to equip faculties with better qualifications, the introduction of a tenure track system, and a stronger emphasis on merit (Haider 2008). Despite the progress made in addressing these challenges, much remains to be accomplished. For example, recent research highlights the insufficient accountability of higher-education institutes, inefficient governance of universities, under-qualified administrative staff, and excessive power placed in the hands of individual vice chancellors and registrars (Nawab and Bhatti 2011; Sial et al. 2011).

This situation calls for leadership practices that support the transformation of institutes in lieu of these developments. Therefore, the present study focuses on transformational leadership (TL) and participative decision-making (PDM) in public and private Pakistani universities. Research put forward TL and PDM as a solution to meet the need for rapid (university) innovation (Jones 2013; Nordin 2012; Tipu et al. 2012). This study aims to explore the extent to which Pakistan’s academic leaders adopt TL and PDM in public and private universities.

Theoretical background

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is one of the predominant approaches in educational leadership (Lai 2014; Nordin 2012). It was first elucidated as a

theory in the literature during the 1970s and 1980s (Bass *1985b*). We focus on “academic leadership” following the related definition of Ramsden (*1998*) who stresses that an academic transformational leader effectively communicates the mission and vision of the institute in relation to the task at hand. His/her TL requires precise explanations, while creating and fostering an environment in which staff can contribute and collaborate.

TL is a multidimensional concept. Podsakoff et al. (*1990*) distinguish six types of behaviour in TL: articulating a vision, providing an appropriate model, fostering the acceptance of group goals, high-performance expectations, providing individualised support, and intellectual stimulation. Though no consensus can be found in the literature as to a “final” typology, a core set seems to be shared by most researchers (Hardy et al. *2010*):

Articulating a vision

Transformational leaders can make a difference by envisaging the future and creating an ideal and unique image of the organisation. They inspire such a vision in their followers with a positive and hopeful outlook (Kouzes and Posner *1995*). In so doing, the transformational leader encourages others to adopt the transformation process as their own and thus allows for the attainment of the targeted transformation (Geib and Swenson *2013*).

Providing an appropriate model

Kouzes and Posner (*1995*) explained this concept as modelling, implying that leaders go first. Transformational leaders create a programme of excellence and set the example for others. They believe that consistency between words and deeds builds their credibility as transformational leaders.

Fostering the acceptance of group goals

Fostering the acceptance of group goals is likely to promote collaboration, cooperation, and harmony among group members, encouraging them to be team players (Schaubroeck et al. *2007*). Shamir et al. (*1993*) also favour this TL-behaviour: from their point of view it (1) encourages leaders to work with the team members to develop a common or shared vision of the desired outcomes from the group efforts, and (2) encourages leaders to share responsibility with them in developing joint strategies and actions to achieve common goals.

High-performance expectations

Successful leaders expect the best from their employees and themselves. For people to achieve high performance, leaders must provide clear directions, feedback, and encouragement (Weichun et al. *2012*). Here, the leader raises followers' expectations and inspires action by reassuring them that they can achieve these ambitious goals.

Providing individualised support

In order to foster supportive relationships, transformational leaders keep lines of communication open so that followers feel free to share ideas and leaders also offer direct recognition of the unique contributions of each follower (Bass *1985a*). Rafferty and Griffin (*2004*) stated that a leader provides individual socio-emotional support, developing followers to realise their highest level of potential and empowerment.

Intellectual stimulation

This leadership behaviour aims to increase followers' interest in and awareness of problems, developing their ability and inclination to think about problems in new ways (Bass *1985a*). The leader must be able to determine the intellectual capacities of subordinates and decide the level of tasks that can be assigned to subordinates (Northouse *2007*).

Participative decision-making

Participative decision-making implies power-sharing arrangements with hierarchically unequal individuals (Conger and Lawler III *2009*). This results in co-determination of working conditions, collaborative problem-solving, and collaborative discussion of decisions to be made. Locke and Schweiger (*1979*) and Harrison (*1987*) additionally stress how superiors invite subordinates' opinions and take these opinions into account. According to Cotton et al. (*1988*), such employee involvement potentially improves work quality and employees' attitudes, plays a role in overcoming resistance to change, motivates workers, and strengthens goal-oriented behaviour (Vroom and Jagao *1990*).

The relationship between transformational leadership and participative decision-making

According to Schuster (*1994*), transformational leaders transfer decision-making authority to their subordinates. Empowered staff is thus an indicator of TL in an organisation. Such leaders collaborate with staff to define goals, reduce teacher isolation, support change, and foster delegation and active communication (Liontos *1992*). One of the resulting effects of TL is helping employees to transform the organisation (Burns *1978*). The latter fits with the strong need for university innovation, outlined above.

Leadership and decision-making in public and private universities

The Pakistan Higher Education Commission took steps to attract the private sector in meeting the growing demand for higher education (Harris *2004*). Though private universities are largely independent of governmental policies, they must adhere to quality standards in terms of teaching and administration. Private universities are even partially funded by HEC in research, faculty development programmes, library, and infrastructure by fulfilling the specific terms and conditions set by a HEC. However, there are differences between public and private universities in terms of faculty hiring, student evaluation, and administration.

In this study, we ask to what extent leadership and decision-making practices differ between public and private universities. In the literature, differences between the public and private universities have been described. The following five domains can be clearly linked to both leadership and decision-making:

1. Differences in organisational aims: The goals of public universities are often less clear than private universities. Public universities strive for prestige (Rainey *2009*) or research and teaching performance (Hicks *2012*). The focus on ranking universities reflects this particular concern (Shin and Toutkoushian *2011*). In contrast, private universities put an emphasis on competition, financial returns, and profit (Hicklin et al. *2009*). This can be related to leadership as reflected in the development of a particular “vision” (Kantabutra *2005*).
2. The extent to which the universities are scrutinised: Feeney and Rainey (*2010*) state that public universities face higher levels of red tape due to expectations about transparency, accountability, and diversity, all of which invoke much paperwork and reporting. This

affects all academic dimensions up to HR policies. In particular, public universities have more stringent systems of hiring, firing, and promotion as compared to private universities (McLendon et al. [2006](#)). Levy ([2013](#)) refers to this as the “squeezing” of universities. Dealing with transparency and diversity are central to transformational leaders’ attempt to share high-performance expectations and involve staff in decision-making processes. Although private universities are also subject to external oversight, this is less developed and not dependent on legislative regulations or scrutinising policies (Denison et al. [2014](#)).

3. *3. The way staff are motivated:* Public universities offer job stability and security; private universities motivate employees through financial incentives, career possibilities, and relative autonomy (Boyne [2002](#)). Aside from this, public universities have more limited abilities to tie financial incentives to performance at work (Weibel et al. [2010](#)). This introduces a need for stronger intellectual stimulation as reflected in TL (Ayoubi and Khalifa [2015](#)). It also requires giving more autonomy in the context of shared decision-making.
4. *4. Differences in discretionary powers:* Nawab and Bhatti ([2011](#)) stress that public university management is strongly influenced by bureaucratic mechanisms. For instance, Khang ([2015](#)) points at the increase of agency cost and decrease of operational efficiency in universities. In contrast, private universities are run by a board, influenced by financial stakeholders and their interests. In China, for instance, research indicates that external stakeholders in private universities adopt a transformational management style in order to extend power to staff (Lin [2015](#)). This can be linked to shared decision-making (Boyne [2002](#)).

The differences between public and private universities are not always clear with regard to the “power” issue. For instance, in Pakistan, governmental politics also define the boundaries of public initiatives in terms of the quality standards to be adhered to (Bodla and Nawaz [2010](#)). This will affect the leadership dimension (Dattey et al. [2014](#)).

5. *5. Differences in accountability:* Some believe that the values and mission of public universities lead them to be less accountable or efficient (Alderman and Carey [2010](#)) as they lack proper monitoring. This assumes university funding is linked to accountability and will force public universities to become more efficient and produce better results (McLendon et al. [2006](#)). In contrast, private universities have to cater for their “customers” and therefore heavily emphasise student satisfaction (Bayraktar et al. [2013](#)). Not all researchers agree with this comparison between public and private universities (Othman and Othman [2014](#)). Othman and Othman ([2014](#)) emphasise that, particularly in a developing countries, both types of university should be accountable to society (e.g. community involvement, social responsibility). The fact that private universities are more accountable to their external stakeholders that take part in the decision-making process could result in lower levels of participative decision-making (Hunter [2015](#)).

This brings us to the focus of the present study. Changes in Pakistani universities prompt questions in relation to the kind of leadership that is necessary to meet the related challenges. Little is known about the nature of TL and PDM in private or public universities in Pakistan. An exception is a recent survey-based study of Bodla and Nawaz ([2010](#)), which focused on differences in staff preferences for transformational, transactional, or passive leadership in either public or private universities in Pakistan.

Research design

In a previous study, we identified differences in private and public universities in terms of TL and PDM (A et al. [2015](#)). However, that study was based on a survey design, and it was stressed that the surveys used might not have been sufficiently geared to the Pakistani academic context. In the present study, we adopt an interpretative approach based on semi-structured interviews involving leaders of public and private universities. By using a qualitative method, we were able to gather the rich data from the university leaders. This study also uses cross-case analysis to compare TL and PDM in public and private universities. The research questions guiding this study are as follows: “To what extent do Pakistani academic leaders adopt TL and PDM? And to what extent do we observe differences in leaders of public and private universities?”.

Sampling

In total, there are currently 34 private and 50 public universities in Punjab, the largest, most populated province of Pakistan. Four universities were selected on the basis of a stratified sample: two public universities out of 50, and two private universities out of 34. From each university, three faculties, (faculty of sciences, faculty of social sciences, and faculty of arts and humanities), five departments from each faculty, and deans of particular faculties were selected. In total, 46 deans and heads of the faculty/departments were involved in this study. Their average age was 26–65 years, with on average 01–30 years of experience.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview was designed, structured along the six types of behaviour associated with TL and elements of PDM. On the basis of each starting question, leaders got the opportunity to talk freely about the leadership practices adopted in their universities. Next to the interview questionnaire, an interview protocol was developed to guarantee a sufficiently controlled interview scenario (see “Appendix 1”). On average, interviews lasted between 30 min and 1 h. All interviews were audio-taped in view of subsequent analysis. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Names of respondents were re-coded in the transcripts to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis

Building on the methodology suggested by Matthew et al. ([1994](#)), each interview was transcribed verbatim. Nvivo version 9.0 (QSR [2013](#)) was used to support the data analysis. First, the analysis focused on questions in relation to TL and then on questions in relation to PDM. In order to establish inter-rater reliability, ten interviews were coded independently by the first author and a researcher not familiar with the study. The inter-coder reliability was 91 %, which is in accordance with the standard of 80 % (Matthew et al. [1994](#)).

To start, each interview transcript was dealt with as a single case, looking for themes or patterns in participants’ responses. Next, each emerging theme was linked to a relevant TL-behaviour and an element of PDM. The analysis proceeded by linking case-data to the other cases within the same university (public/private). This helped to obtain a more general and less case-specific picture of leadership and decision-making features in a particular public or private university. Finally, a cross-case analysis was carried out to compare data from private and public universities. We calculated frequencies of fragments related to each theme and subsequent percentages.

Results

Building on the analysis, we structured the themes identified in the interviews along theoretical behaviour as found in the TL and PDM literature. To illustrate these themes, fragments of the transcripts are presented below. We limit our focus to the key differences and similarities, as summarised in Table 1. The numbers in the table refer to the amount/proportion of interview fragments that are related to a particular TL-behaviour (Table 1, Appendix 2).

Table 1

Summary of the fragments related to each TL-behaviour

TL-behaviours	Public		Private	
	Frequencies	Percentages	Frequencies	Percentages
<i>Articulation a vision</i>				
A leader can set the vision according to the goals and objectives	6	26.08	6	37.50
A leader must have a vision and the ability to articulate that vision	3	13.05	5	31.25
Teamwork is important for setting a vision	8	34.79	5	31.25
A leader can set a vision by starting new programmes and initiatives	6	26.08	0	0
	<i>N</i> = 23	100	<i>N</i> = 16	100
<i>Providing an appropriate role model</i>				
Teachers respect me when I respect them	14	51.85	6	33.33
Teachers respect me when I solve their problems	3	11.11	4	22.22
Teachers express respect in view of their personal benefits	10	37.04	3	16.68
Teachers respect me when I share things with them	0	0	5	27.78
	<i>N</i> = 27	100	<i>N</i> = 18	100
<i>Fostering the acceptance of group goals</i>				
Leaders are in favour of collaboration	16	64	11	57.90
There is no collaboration among teachers	2	8	5	26.31
Leaders appreciate collaboration to a certain extent	7	28	3	15.79
	<i>N</i> = 25	100	<i>N</i> = 19	100
<i>High-performance expectations</i>				
University sets the standards, and we ensure standards implementation	10	47.61	10	50

TL-behaviours	Public		Private	
	Frequencies	Percentages	Frequencies	Percentages
Leaders set job standards for their teachers	10	47.61	5	25
Leaders evaluate teachers' performance on the base of students feedback	1	4.78	5	25
	<i>N</i> = 21	100	<i>N</i> = 20	100
<i>Providing individualised support</i>				
Leader assigns the tasks according to teachers' capabilities	17	51.51	16	66.67
Leader assigns the task after interaction with teachers	9	27.28	5	20.83
Assign the task according to teachers' motivation	7	21.21	3	12.50
	<i>N</i> = 33	100	<i>N</i> = 24	100
<i>Intellectual stimulation</i>				
Leaders considers that teachers are motivated by incentives	20	64.51	14	58.33
The leader should motivate his teachers	7	22.59	4	16.67
Leaders considered that motivation is intrinsic	4	12.90	6	25
	<i>N</i> = 31	100	<i>N</i> = 24	100
<i>Participative decision making</i>				
We decide together	21	58.33	9	33.34
Pulse taking, leader prepares the work in advance and then seek their opinion	5	13.89	5	18.52
Leaders make policy decisions on their own	4	11.11	2	7.40
When presented with conflict, leaders decide by themselves	2	5.56	3	11.11
Leaders resolve the conflict through communication	4	11.11	8	29.63
	<i>N</i> = 36	100	<i>N</i> = 27	100

The frequencies refer to the number of "fragments" found in the interviews transcripts in relation to each particular (sub)theme

Transformational leadership

TL-behaviour 1, "articulating a vision"

After asking general questions about their leadership experience, we presented the first question. "How can a leader set an inspiring vision for his/her university and how can he/she communicate that vision to his/her colleagues?". Most leaders stated that they found this a difficult

question. Nevertheless, the following four themes emerged from the analysis: (1) *Leaders can set a vision according to goals and objectives*, (2) *Leaders must have a vision and the ability to articulate that vision*, (3) *Leaders can set a vision through teamwork*, and (4) *A leader can set a vision by starting new programmes and initiatives*.

In public universities, 26.08 % of deans/heads emphasised that a faculty/departmental leader must be aware of the vision of the university, its goal, objectives, and mission and develop strategies to achieve related objectives; 26.08 % of the fragments linked the vision of the university to the start of new programmes and 34.79 % considered teamwork to be important when setting a vision.

I think setting a vision is possible through teamwork. Secondly, leaders' own ability to have frequent interaction with all the stakeholders because all the efforts are coordinated. (BZF2, H3)

The private university deans and heads did not link the articulation of a vision to new programmes. They strongly emphasised setting a vision in line with the university goals (37.50 %). They also stressed the importance of articulating the vision (31.25 %). However, setting this vision in collaboration with the whole team was stressed to a lesser extent (31.25 %):

Setting a vision and the articulation of a vision is very difficult, but a leader must keep on sharing and communicating the vision to his colleagues. Then other people will try to reach that vision. (UMF1, H2)

TL-behaviour 2, "providing an appropriate model"

In response to the question "When does a staff member respect you as a leader?", we identified the following four themes: (1) *Teachers respect me when I respect them*, (2) *Teachers respect me when I solve their problems*, (3) *Teachers express respect me in view of their personal benefit*, and (4) *Teachers respect me when I share things*.

Many of the interview fragments of deans and heads in public (51.85 %) and private (33.33 %) universities indicated that if you respect your staff, they will respect you. Nevertheless, public university deans and heads (37.04 %) think teachers only respect you to get benefits from you. This belief is observed to a lesser extent in private universities:

Teachers usually think about their own benefits. If they get some benefits from the head of the department, then they will give him respect. (BZF1, H5)

Private universities' deans and heads believe teachers give you respect when you share things (27.78 % of interview fragments). We did not observe this belief in public universities:

I consider my teachers as partners. I put forward the matter and tell them all the relevant facts. So they can understand, even when dealing with tough issues. They respect me, and I don't feel reluctant to share things with them. (UMF2, H4)

TL-behaviour 3, "fostering the acceptance of group goals"

Regarding the question "What about your teachers working together?", we identified the following three themes: (1) *Leaders are in favour of collaboration*, (2) *There is no collaboration among teachers*, and (3) *Leaders appreciate collaboration to a certain extent*.

Deans and heads of public (64 %) and private (57.90 %) universities mentioned that their academic staff collaborate in relation to academic affairs. However, public (28 %) and private (15.79 %) universities stress that this collaboration is mostly limited to teaching and some administrative affairs. We also observed that public (8 %) and private (26.31 %) deans and heads stress that there is no collaboration between academic staff. Some deans and heads point out that this might be a threatening development:

Unfortunately, the culture of sharing is diminishing now. Sharing of knowledge, expertise, and reinforcement of each other, which is the thing that needs to be improved. (UMF3, H1)

TL-behaviour 4, "high-performance expectations"

Participants were asked: "Who sets the standards in relation to the job performance of your staff members?". The interview transcripts revealed the following three themes: (1) *The university sets the standards and we ensure the standards are implemented*, (2) *Leaders set job standards for their teachers*, and (3) *Leaders evaluate teachers' performance on the basis of student feedback*.

The deans and heads of public (47.61 %) and private (50 %) universities remarked that the university defines the performance standards for teachers:

When the university selects a person they expect performance from them, and for that they set some standards and mechanisms. (IUF2, H2)

The deans and heads of public (47.61 %) and private (25 %) universities state that they set the performance standards for teachers. In private universities, the deans and heads (25 %) remarked that they evaluate the performance standards of their faculty on the basis of student feedback. This approach is less prominent in public universities (4.78 %):

We usually assessed the teachers' performance on the basis of students' feedback, which is also part of their annual appraisal. (UMF2, H3)

To conclude, the deans and heads seem unclear regarding university standards. Almost 50 % of leaders from public and private universities follow university standards, and the remaining 50 % consider it the leaders' responsibility to "set standards".

TL-behaviour 5, "providing individualised support"

The question "How do you develop a supportive relationship with your teachers?" elicited three themes: (1) *Leaders assign tasks according to teachers' abilities*, (2) *Leaders assign tasks after interaction with teachers*, and (3) *Leaders assign tasks according to teachers' motivation*.

The deans and heads of public (51.51 %) and private (66.67 %) universities responded that if they assign a task to their teachers, they select them according to their abilities and provide them with support in achieving that task or challenge:

I assign the duties to my teachers according to their abilities and capabilities. Someone is more interested in fieldwork, and someone is more interested in research and teaching. So I assign according to their calibre, and I am always there to support them. (BZF1, H1)

Deans and heads in public (27.28 %) and private (20.83 %) universities believe in interaction before assigning a task. The public (21.21 %) and private (12.50 %) university deans and heads consider teachers' motivation before assigning the task. It is remarkable that the transcripts do not

reflect how deans or heads provide support in relation to personal matters, in both public and private universities.

TL-behaviour 6, “intellectual stimulation”

We put forward the question “What motivates your teachers to deliver high-quality work?”. The following themes emerged from the transcripts: (1) *Leaders consider that teachers are motivated by incentives*, (2) *The leader should motivate his teachers*, and (3) *Leaders believe that motivation is intrinsic*.

The deans and heads of public (64.51 %) and private (58.33 %) universities believe that their teachers are motivated by particular incentives, encouragement, and appreciation.

The public university deans and heads (22.59 %) consider this as a key responsibility of their own:

Every person needs a different kind of motivation. Some need verbal reassurance. Some work if you send them an email “well done, keep it up”. Some need a pat on the back. So it is entirely depending on the individual who is leading. (UMF1, H1)

Conversely, this was not strongly observed in private universities (16.67 %). The private university deans and heads (25 %) consider staff motivation to be intrinsic in nature. Public university deans and heads put forward this idea to a lesser extent (12.90 %). The interview transcripts reflect opinions from the leaders. They especially emphasise that they “should” adopt this kind of intellectual stimulation. However, the heads and deans did not give practical examples of actual ways of motivating their staff.

Participative decision-making

Participants were presented with the following question: “When you need to make a decision, what is your general approach?”. Three themes were identified in the transcripts: (1) *We decide together*, (2) *Pulse taking: prepare the work in advance and then seek their opinion*, and (3) *Leaders make policy decisions on their own*.

Deans and heads of public (58.33 %) and private (33.34 %) universities refer to a collaborative approach. They involve their teachers in decision-making:

Usually, we decide together about course allocation, student problems, exams, research matters, etc. (BZF3, D1)

Deans and heads of public (13.89 %) and private (18.52 %) universities seem to sample opinions from individual teachers to understand their opinions about particular matters. However, in relation to policy matters, both heads and deans from public (11.11 %) and private (7.40 %) universities rather decide on their own.

PDM can result in differences of opinion, which can lead to conflict. To develop a better understanding of this, we presented leaders with an additional question about conflict resolution. Two main themes reappear: (1) *When presented with conflict, leaders decide by themselves* and (2) *They resolve the conflict through communication*.

The private (11.11 %) and public (5.56 %) university deans and heads stated that when there is conflict, they decide on their own. Deans and heads of public (11.11 %) and private (29.63 %) universities also stated that they try to settle the conflict through communication;

People sometimes do not agree, but I think communication is the best way to go ahead. The better and more you communicate, the less you have conflict. (UMF1, H1)

Discussion

The present study explored the extent to which TL and PDM is adopted by the deans and heads of department in public and private universities in Pakistan. Our findings confirm the multidimensional nature of TL as explained in the literature. In terms of the six TL-behaviour types outlined above, some differences were observed between public and private universities when analysing the interview transcripts.

TL-behaviour “articulating a vision”

Private university deans and heads were explicitly concerned about their vision. They were clearly aware of how vision translates into practice. This was observed to a lesser extent in the public universities. Deans and heads were less explicit about a particular faculty/department vision or just followed a broader university vision. This can be linked to the *differences in organisational aims* of public and private Pakistani universities. Whereas public university leaders follow a “set” system (Eckel and Morphew 2009), private university deans and heads are concerned about the success and profit of their universities, in addition to employee performance and attainment of standards (Rainey 2009). The literature often presents a more dynamic picture in relation to this TL-behaviour and points out that public universities need to develop a vision that makes explicit their quality, standards, and achievements, in line with society’s expectations. Recent calls to produce socially-relevant output, return-on-investment, etc. are now also applicable to public university settings (Hart and Northmore 2011).

TL-behaviour “providing an appropriate model”

The deans and heads in both public and private universities present themselves as role models for their teachers. These findings are in accordance with a previous quantitative study which showed that transformational leaders set an example for others, leading to employees’ job satisfaction (A et al. 2015). Observed differences between private and public universities are mainly linked to a stronger emphasis on “respect” as part of the interpersonal relationship between the leader and teachers in public universities. The latter could be explained on the basis of a stronger emphasis on hierarchical structures in public universities (Fullwood et al. 2013).

TL-behaviour “fostering the acceptance of group goals”

Here, there are stronger differences between public and private universities. The private university leaders admit that their teachers are less likely to work together (e.g. in article writing, sharing teaching materials). Teachers collaborate mainly in teaching and administrative assignments. This situation is different in public universities. Teachers are expected to work together as they usually work in teams or committees. What we observe in the Pakistan context is different from the observation of Hicklin et al. (2009) who stress that both public and private universities need to create a more collaborative and shared environment within and between universities. Such differences observed in the Pakistan context could be explained by the nature of the “vision” put forward by private universities, which tend to value higher financial returns over research or educational quality, for example. The latter requires a stronger collaborative endeavour (Aktas et al. 2015). Nevertheless, we found one remark of a particular leader alarming for a university setting: “the culture of sharing is diminishing now (...) (UMF3, H1)”. Coping with the challenges of higher education in Pakistan requires “united” forces within academia.

TL-behaviour “high-performance expectations”

While deans and heads of both private and public universities adopt standards and evaluation policies set by the university, they tend to do it in different ways. The public university deans and heads are not satisfied with the standards put forward by the higher education commission. This is in accordance with the study of Ullah et al. (2011), who state that there is an appropriate yardstick for quality assessment, but the implementation of the standards is lacking. This was also noted by Feeney and Rainey (2010) who emphasised that leaders in public universities build on input from external stakeholders, such as general public, media, and the government (Stewart and Schlegel 2009). In contrast, deans and heads in private universities adopt a strict quality assurance approach, based on established performance measures that are heavily influenced by internal stakeholders. They stress that teachers have been informed about the related evaluation standards and student feedback. This is consistent with the study of Roolah and Türk (2007) who found that private universities seem to value student feedback in the appraisal function somewhat more highly than public universities.

TL-behaviour “Providing individualised support”

The deans and heads of public and private universities provide support for their teachers to achieve tasks, which are assigned in line with their abilities. They interact with them, encourage them, and support them. Our results are in line with the study of Marshall et al. (2012) who found that transformational leaders provide individualised support and encouragement to teachers. This also mirrors the results from our earlier survey study set up in Pakistan (A et al. 2015). However, in both private and public universities, leaders were less clear about how to provide support to teachers. This points to the critical difference between the perceptions of the leaders and their potential actions.

TL-behaviour “intellectual stimulation”

The deans and heads of both private and public universities believe that appreciation, encouragement, incentives and a more conducive working environment are key motivators for teachers. This confirms the findings of Hicklin et al. (2009) who stress that public universities have motivated teachers because of job security, and private universities motivate staff through financial incentives and career possibilities. Boyne (2002) also argues that public universities provide more relative autonomy to teachers, resulting in a more stimulating environment. However, it must be noted that in our study, while leaders mention they “should” adopt this kind of approach, they gave few real-life examples of how they do so.

In terms of PDM the literature emphasises that leaders should give team members a chance to voice their opinions (Bergman et al. 2012). However, this is not yet the case in Pakistani universities. Our results point out that deans and heads in public and private universities adopt participative approaches, but these are limited to routine matters. Other studies in the Pakistan setting come to the same conclusion (Nadeem et al. 2008). For example, research indicates that Pakistani deans tend to ignore the recommendations of lecturers (Shah et al. 2014). These findings could be partly explained from the point of view of Pakistani culture, which emphasises the traditional power-position of leaders and inter-relational “boundaries”. In this context, Aktas et al. (2015) analysed the extent to which cultural tightness–looseness affects the way they observe more or less collectivism and power distance. The Pakistani cultural setting would therefore reflect a tight focus on social norms, resulting in weaker PDM.

Limitations and directions for future research

Though our research findings are informative, the present study is not without limitations. Firstly, we only interviewed heads and deans to gain insight into the nature of leadership and decision-making within universities. As noted in the discussion of our results, this introduces a tension between perceptions on the one hand and real-life actions on the other. Other methodologies should be adopted to tackle this issue. For example, one approach could build on a multi-actor perspective to develop a richer picture that enables a comparison of perceptions and experiences of different parties, such as teachers, students and leaders.

In this study, we could build on available survey-data collected from teachers in other Pakistani universities. Teachers reporting on the leadership behaviour of their deans and heads of department indicate that leadership in Pakistani universities is transformational in nature, and decision-making can be qualified as participative (A et al. 2015). Secondly, both public and private universities are autonomous bodies in Pakistan. This introduces promising directions to set up interviews with the rectors and vice chancellors to understand how the universities deal with the changing higher education political context and how these actors implement the new policies. This can be linked to the need to adopt a longitudinal research design to clarify potential changes or evolution in leadership approaches and decision-making. Thirdly, though a relatively large number of interviews were carried out, universities, faculties and departments from different provinces should be included in future research to explore the reported differences and develop a comprehensive picture of Pakistani higher education.

Implications for theory, policy, and practice

Though we observed that a basic level of TL and PDM is adopted in the Pakistani universities involved in the present study, there is room for considerable improvement. The changing context of Pakistani higher education calls for “leaders who thrive on the challenge of change” (Brown 2001). A key political implication could be an investment in “leadership development”. Countries need accountable and autonomous universities with adequate leaders at the top. From a practical point of view, the six TL-behaviour types can be the backbone of such a leadership development programme starting from a strength–weakness analysis of individual leadership behaviour. From a theoretical perspective, our results add an in-depth perspective to the six TL-behaviour types as observed in a university context and with a focus on differences between private and public universities. This adds to the validity of the theory in these particular contexts.

Conclusions

The present study investigated the TL and PDM practices in public and private universities of Pakistan and to what extent these practices are different in both types of university.

We found interesting similarities and differences between public and private universities. Overall, the present study confirms that the nature of TL and PDM can be described in terms of available models, derived from developed countries.

We found similarities in most, and differences in some of the six TL-behaviour types in public and private universities in Pakistan. Some of these differences are important, particularly in the context of the challenges currently encountered by universities in Pakistan. While PDM was observed in both public and private universities it largely concerned involving staff in rather routine matters. This might be too limited to cope with the changing requirements from the HEC as to quality assurance, accreditations, and many new innovations set for the future of Pakistan’s higher education.

Appendix 1: Interview protocol

Subject	Detail	Notes
Research topic	Leadership and decision-making practices in public/private universities in Pakistan	
Research question	To what extent do Pakistan academic leaders adopt transformational leadership and participative decision making? And to what extent do we observe differences in leaders of public/private universities?	
Way of contacting a respondent	Introductory email with indication that the respondent will be called personally	
	At least three attempts to call the respondent by phone to set an appointment	
	During the call, (1) repeat the research topic; (2) repeat research question; (3) ask for willingness to participate; (4) give time frame (duration interview); (5) specify preferred location at premises of respondent; (6) acknowledge the participation	
Arrival at premises	According to the appointment	
Prior to the interview	1. Thank the respondent and restate the research topic and research question	
	2. Present the letter of consent and mention the deontological code of the university to ensure privacy and ethical issues	
	3. Seek permission to audio-tape the interview, for transcription purpose	
	4. Indicate the interview will last 30 min–1 h	
	5. Thank the respondent for his/her time and participation	
During the interview	Interview background:	
	Please introduce yourself?	
	How long you are working on this post?	
	Tell me about a leader you have worked with, and who you greatly respect?	
	What are the characteristics of a person that make him/her a good leader?	
	Key starting questions:	
	1. How can a leader set his/her vision forward for his/her university and how he can communicate that inspiring vision to his/her colleagues?	
	2. When does your staff member respect you as a leader?	
	3. How do you develop a supportive relationship with your teachers?	
	4. What about your teachers working together?	
	5. Who sets the standards as to the job performance of your teachers?	
	6. What motivates your teachers to deliver high-quality work?	

Appendix 2

See Table 1.

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